

Testimony of

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House Bill 5313: An Act Concerning Visitation by Grandparents
Select Committee on Children: March 2, 2010

Thank you for this opportunity to comment today on this issue of import to families across the state.

As you know, the Connecticut Commission on Aging (CoA) is an independent, nonpartisan state agency that is part of the legislative branch of government. We are devoted to preparing our state for a burgeoning aging population while promoting policies that enhance the lives of the present and future generations of older adults. For sixteen years, the Commission has served as an effective leader in statewide efforts to promote choice, independence and dignity for Connecticut's older adults and persons with disabilities.

Earlier this year, this Committee and the Select Committee on Aging held an Informational Forum on the rights of grandparents to visit their grandchildren. I was pleased to be able to participate in that forum and provide information on behalf of our office. At that forum, we shared with you that about 4.7% of children in Connecticut live with their grandparents. About 19,000 grandparents in our state care for their grandchildren, and about 30% of those grandparents are over the age of 60.

We also heard heartbreaking stories from individuals in our state who had lost contact with their grandchildren. This loss of contact unfortunately often follows the death of a child, exacerbating an already-grievous situation.

The benefits of intergenerational interaction are well-documented. For older adults, frequent interaction with children stimulates learning; decreases loneliness, boredom and depression; increases feelings of happiness and interest; and provides socialization. For children, interaction with older adults enhances communication skills; promotes self-esteem; and develops problem-solving abilities. Additional studies have found that children experiencing divorce see their grandparents as confidants and sources of comfort.

While, ideally, families would ensure the continuation of these often-beneficial relationships without judicial or legislative intervention, too often, this does not occur. For many reasons—ranging from incarceration to death to complex familial issues—parents decide to discontinue contact with some family members. And, parents have the right to make these decisions, as upheld by the US Supreme Court, in *Troxel v. Granville*. As explained by the constitutional law experts who testified at the forum, states have taken varying approaches to the issue of visitation rights in light of this decision.

The proposal before you in HB 5313 could provide a partial solution for some grandparents in our state to gain visitation rights when appropriate. As the constitutionality of similar proposals is being tested in states across the nation, we recommend and anticipate that this Committee do the same. Additionally, proactive measures would help ensure that, during a time of family strife, such as divorce, families are made aware of the benefits of grandparent-grandchild interaction. We support the Committee's dedication to finding a balanced approach to this issue and look forward to working with you moving forward. Thank you.